



# CHICAGO ART DECO SOCIETY

Magazine



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At the Intersection of Art, Design,  
and Technology:

# THE REBIRTH OF THE CHICAGO MOTOR CLUB

BY PAUL ALESSANDRO

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**N**O ONE SETS OUT to design an historic building. In every case, the buildings we now call historic were, at one time, gleaming examples of modernity. Each began as a dialogue between designer and client, an interaction so relevant that it remains valid today. It is this conversation we endeavor to continue when we consider an old building for renovation. By examining this built history and the intersection of art, design, and technology that created it, we learn about our past and ourselves.

For as long as man has walked upright, there has been a symbiotic—and at times competitive—connection among the three disciplines of art, design, and technology. Each influences the others and fuels their respective advances. From cave paintings that depicted the technology of the day as art, to the Egyptians, Greeks, and Romans who treated art as a direct extension of design, continuing on into the Renaissance, we find these intertwined disciplines driving cultural advances. Perpetuated by the elite, the ruling class, and by artists themselves, each new style would wipe the slate of the old and introduce new ways of thinking about how we interact with the world.

Through the late 1800s, these generational shifts happened slowly. But with the advent of the Machine Age and advertising, styles flew fast and furious. Impressionism, Fauvism, German Expressionism, Cubism, Futurism, Constructivism, Dadaism, Surrealism, Abstract Expression-



Entrance to the Chicago Motor Club, now the Hampton Inn Chicago Downtown.



*The Chicago Motor Club emblem displayed above the entrance to the Hampton Inn Chicago Downtown that now occupies the club's former headquarters.*

ism—each flowing from, and yet rejecting, the previous one. In many instances, these schools of thought were correlated to architectural styles. Classical, Gothic, and Medieval passed, leading eventually in the late 1800s to the Vienna Secession, which promoted a union of artists and craftsmen and spawned Art Nouveau and eventually Art Deco.

In the heyday of modern design, the 1930s through the 1950s, some of the most famous designers applied their skills to the most mundane of objects. Art Deco was the seed that started a design transformation that brought good design to the masses. It encompassed all manner of art and craft, but above all reflected modern technology. Influenced by many of the styles of the day, including Art Nouveau, Cubism, and the new fascination with all things Egyptian and Aztec, Art Deco was not born of philosophical ideas. It was the first purely decorative style and was meant to unify all aspects of design under a consistent language of modernity that integrated technology into daily life. Although Art Deco was initially a style of luxury and a Hollywood staple, early industrial designers quickly delivered this same elegance and glamour to a wider audience. Everyday objects such as cars, toasters, furniture, and tableware all benefited from the application of design, which made these objects desirable and highly commodified.

Art Deco lasted through the Great Depression. During that time, its traits of practicality, design simplicity, and streamlining reflected the austerity of that era but at



*Detail showing the lane line pattern of the terrazzo floor and the legend for the major automobile routes in the U. S. in 1929 shown on the Norton mural.*

the same time hinted at the better times that hopefully lay ahead. It embodied scientific progress and developments in commerce, technology, and transportation directly tied to a fascination with automobiles and motoring in this country. Faster commercial transportation and its connotations of freedom, opulence, mechanization, and modernity made Art Deco an appropriate style of design for interiors of buildings related to travel. Within this milieu, the Chicago Motor Club building came to be.

One of Chicago's early Art Deco buildings, the club's headquarters embodied the newfound freedom to travel that the automobile made possible. The affordable motor car represented a seismic shift in how people lived. As history has demonstrated, groundbreaking shifts in technology are often followed by advancements in art and design.

The Chicago Motor Club was designed by Chicago architects Holabird & Root. Construction began on the 16-story steel and masonry Art Deco building in 1928 and was completed in January 1929 at the onset of the Depression. It was originally designed as home for the eponymous automobile driver assistance organization. At its opening, advertisements hailed it as "the most



*Chandelier and silver-leaf ornamentation of the upper lobby.*

beautiful, complete and efficient plant in the world devoted to the service of motorists." The Chicago Motor Club and its successor organization, the American Automobile Association (AAA)-Chicago Motor Club, occupied the building until 1985 when the club sold it and moved to suburban Aurora. Commercial tenants occupied the structure for the next two decades. Several plans to redevelop and reuse the building were considered but never implemented. The most recent, a planned incarnation to luxury condominiums, was halted in 2008 by the recession. When Hartshorne Plunkard Architecture arrived in 2010, the building had been vacant since 2004.

Repurposing the building into its new use as a hotel presented us with several issues: Could we modernize the building and adapt it for contemporary use? How could we reuse the lobby for both hotel check-in and as a public space? How could we fit guest rooms into a small and narrow floorplate? How could we retain the building's unique sense of place and modernity?

The restoration of the magnificent lobby's focus, a beautiful mural by John Warner Norton, was a major concern. The mural depicts new scenic routes and destinations for the automobile travel the building was intended to promote. So essential to the space, it represents that synthesis of art, design, and technology that is simultaneously art and decor, subject and illustration. The mural represented the mission of the Chicago Motor Club, but over time and as a result of some less than sensitive restorations, it had lost its place as a suitable heart for the new hotel.

The lobby was once a bustling hub of activity, crammed with guests waiting at the counter for a TourBook (later TripTik) that would guide them on their journeys over the newly paved roads depicted in the mural. Yet the condition in which we found it failed to convey that excitement and activity. Originally designed as a temple to travel, the lobby had become a way station for the elevators. The space had been covered with several coats of thick, white paint, the original light fixtures had been packed away for storage, and the original terrazzo floor, with its stylized nod to lane lines speeding past drivers headed down the highways, had been covered with white granite tiles. What remained of the original exuberant design had been replaced by a dull sameness and stagnation that masked the original sense of enthusiasm and movement.

Ironically, the peeling lobby paint provided us with the first clue to the direction we would need to take to return the space to an intersection of activity, a place where people could relax, refresh, and enjoy the surroundings. Underneath the layers of white paint we found evidence of the earlier taupe and warm grey colors that appeared to be an extension of the mural. It was clear that the mural held the key to the original color scheme as well as the concept throughout the design; its angular motifs were repeated in the details of the balcony railings and the silver-leaf trim. Additional allusions to travel, freedom, and nature included eagles and cranes adorning the columns, stylized chevrons and waves representing mountains and water depicted in the mural, the kinetic floor, and floating clouds of light hanging from the ceiling.

Once the mural was cleaned and stripped of earlier, ill-conceived repairs, the original colors became warmer and sharper. With its original sheen restored, the mural balanced the weight of the shiny nickel and silver-leaf details, which in turn reflected the warmer colors applied to the walls and ceiling. With polishing, the dull green floor we first uncovered came back to life, contrasting and coordinating with the newly restored colors of the walls and the mural. In this building that was once a temple to the ideas of design and technology as represented through art,



*Mural by John Warner Norton on the west wall of the lobby.*



*Staircase with Art Deco railing.*

we utilized all three of those disciplines to guide us through the restoration and rebirth of the building. Once we knew we could restore life to the lobby, the transformation of the remainder of the building became straightforward and inevitable.

The modern ideas of the original designers of the Chicago Motor Club, as a temple to art and technology, allow it to remain relevant today. Behind the beautifully restored surfaces of a bygone era beats a modern heart—a heart that will give the

building another 100 years of useful life. We are all masters attended by silent servants who appear to us at the intersection of art, design, and technology; we are lucky to share a moment with this building that will let others continue to experience it after we have gone. ❖

*Paul Alessandro is a partner with Hartsborne Plunkard Architecture and lead architect for the conversion of the Chicago Motor Club to the Hampton Inn Chicago Downtown.*



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*1928 Ford Model A on the lobby balcony of the Chicago Motor Club, now the Hampton Inn Chicago Downtown.  
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